

Right to Food in India: Mitigating amidst Challenges

To secure food and alleviate hunger and malnutrition for a country of 1.23 billion people – the world’s second largest population is a challenging job. The government of India has taken steps to mitigate hunger and malnutrition from the country. Below given are the highlights of the efforts of the government to alleviate hunger and malnutrition.

Sr. No.	Government Programmes	Brief about the Programme
1	Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS)	The programme aims to provide approximately 800 people (68% of the country’s population) which subsidized monthly household rations each year.
2	Mid Day Meal Scheme (MDMS)	The key objectives of the MDMS is to address the issues of hunger and education in schools by serving hot cooked meals; improve the nutritional status of children and improve enrollment, attendance and retention rates in schools and other education centers.
3	Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)	Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) is an Indian government welfare programme which provides food, preschool education, and primary healthcare to children under 6 years of age and their mothers.
4	The National Food Security Act, 2013	The National Food Security Act, 2013 (also Right to Food Act) is an Act of the Parliament of India which aims to provide subsidized food grains to the poor.

India needs a new legal framework for dealing with chronic hunger and starvation. The Supreme Court has issued a series of orders over the past decade in a public litigation known as the “right to food” case directing the government to take measures ranging from providing school children mid-day meals to setting up centers to provide young children, adolescent girls and pregnant mothers supplementary health care and nutrition. But now legislation is needed to ensure the right to adequate nutrition enshrined in law.

The draft version of the National Food Security Bill that is being considered by India’s Parliament would guarantee discounted food-grains to 50% of the urban population and 75% of the rural population – greatly expanding existing food entitlements, which are guaranteed for about one-third of the overall population.

The biggest problem with the bill is the way it deals with starvation. There are two starvation-related provisions. One of them says state governments would be responsible for identifying starving people and communities. The second says that all those people who are identified would be guaranteed two free meals per day for six months.

The second issue is that the legislation employs a narrow, short-term solution to starvation. The Supreme Court has ruled in the right-to-food case that states have a duty to investigate systemic failures that lead to starvation deaths and to ensure that people who are starving have access to food entitlement programs over the long term. The provision of two free meals per day for six months doesn’t come anywhere close to satisfying that mandate.

What’s the way forward?

We must think beyond pro-poor growth to pro-nutrition growth, where rising incomes and government revenues not only target poverty but improvements in health, infrastructure, and education.

At the same time, it is also important to emphasize that India is an enormous and diverse country, and much of health and nutrition programming is directed at the state level. Growth-nutrition strategies will look very different across the country, and there is much work to be done in thinking through these regional challenges.